

Chapter 7

Approaches to Data Analysis, Interpretation and Theory Building for Scholarly Research

“The real mystique of qualitative inquiry lies in the process of *using* data rather than in the process of *gathering* data” (Wolcott 1994, p. 1).

Most experienced qualitative researchers would agree with the sentiments expressed in this quote from Harry Wolcott. But what isn't made clear in the quotation is that the processes of gathering and of using (i.e., analyzing, interpreting and building new theory from) qualitative data are deeply intertwined. From the moment you start collecting qualitative data, you can – and you should – begin the process of analyzing it. In essence, analysis involves looking for patterns in your data. Some may be patterns you see because of the questions you're trying to answer through collecting the data. Some may be informed by theoretical frameworks you're familiar with. And some may be patterns that are completely unanticipated but that emerge out of the data as you reflect on it.

Looking for patterns within and across individual elements of data *as you collect the data* is vital since it will influence how your research project unfolds. The patterns you see may, for example, suggest new questions to ask of informants, new bodies of literature to read, and new ways of using the data you're collecting. And sometimes, data analysis tells you that the research question you thought you were addressing either isn't all that interesting, or cannot be answered using the data you're gathering. Thus, analyzing data as you collect it is essential for shaping the research project.

Data analysis, moreover, is foundational to your interpretation and theory building. In fact, the lines between data analysis and interpretation/theory building are somewhat arbitrary. The linkage between them is iterative rather than sequential. But if the term “analysis” is used to refer to finding patterns in the data, then the phrase “interpretation and theory building” can be used to refer to coming up with an account of what the patterns mean. Compared to description, interpretation and theory building develop a more abstract, more general, or more complete explanation or account of a category of phenomena (the case or context you are studying thus comes to be considered a specific example of that more general category). **When we use the term theory, we follow Bourdieu's (1977) notion and refer to a system of ideas or statements explaining some phenomenon.** We use the phrase “building new theory” to encompass identifying new concepts or constructs or processes that help us understand something about the phenomenon, identifying new variants in a phenomenon and the factors that help us understand and explain them, identifying exceptions that delineate when an existing theory is relevant, and/or challenging the adequacy of existing theory.

In the remainder of this chapter, we elaborate on techniques for data analysis, and for interpretation and theory building, and provide illustrations. In this chapter we assume that publication of an academic paper is your goal. In the next chapter we consider analysis with the goal of deriving managerial implications. We also continue below with a series of exercises that are intended to aid in acquiring

and practicing analytic skills within an academic framework.

Analyzing Data

Regardless of whether you have started collecting interview data, field notes from participant observation, visual data, or archival data from sources such as blogs, websites, or annual reports, the fundamental step in your data analysis will involve coding. Coding refers to discerning small elements in your data that can retain meaning if lifted out of context (Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul 1997, p. 161). **Codes are concepts and these concepts vary in their concreteness/ abstractness as well as their emic/etic nature. Another way of describing coding is “reducing data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments” (Cresswell 2007, p. 148).** Regardless of whether the data you are coding is textual, visual, aural, or artifactual, the same considerations apply. For ease of discussion and because it is most common, we assume in this chapter that your data are transcribed text transcripts. We will also look at coded elements of interviews taken out of the context of the entire interview and as well as out of the entire set of interviews. Nevertheless, it is critical to immerse yourself in the entire data set so that you are familiar with the context before you start to code. This will help you avoid the problem of coding, interpreting, or quoting people out of context.

For example, consider the following post from a blogger who is being studied as part of a project Eileen is currently conducting in conjunction with Daiane Scaraboto. In this project, they are looking at the online collective of “plus-sized” consumers who are frustrated with the offerings available from clothing marketers. The blogger whom we quote below is one of many who comment regularly on the difficulties facing consumers who are plus-sized. She states:

When I hurt my clothes in some way, I tend to panic about it a little bit. My panic typically leads me to occasionally-elaborate improvisational remedies; for a dress [that got caught in a car door and developed a hole], this meant rinsing the dirt out in the bathroom at work (and dealing with a wet hem for hours) and then later, at home, very carefully hand-stitching the rip closed. If I had greater or more reliable access to clothes I like, I might have said, “Eh, I may be able to fix it, but if not, no big deal.” As it is, my mind went something like “OH MY FUCKING GOD, I HAVE TO FIX THIS NOW NOW NOW, I HAVE NO REASON TO BELIEVE I WILL EVER FIND A DRESS LIKE THIS AGAIN, EXCLAMATION POINT.”

.... This, my friends, is a side effect of living with style scarcity. Because I really don't have any reason to believe I'd find something like the dress [that's torn] ever again. Now, no longer being in possession of a particular dress is not exactly a hardship; certainly not on the level of not having a place to live or enough to eat. But the panic bubbles up anyway, because I can't just run to Anthropologie or H&M or where-ever the ladies several sizes down from me do their shopping and pick up another. Fat style is a scarce resource. (Lesley, Two Whole Cakes Blog, January 21, 2009.)

In examining a quotation like this one, several codes can be assigned. For example, the sentences “This, my friends, is a side effect of living with style scarcity. Because I really don’t have any reason to believe I’d find something like the dress [that’s torn] ever again” are assigned the code *fashion resource scarcity*. This seems both obvious and important to code as it speaks to the blogger’s experience as someone who experiences a shortage of the plus-sized clothing she desperately needs. **It’s also worth mention that this is an “emic” code, meaning it draws directly on the language used by the people being studied.** It seems particularly interesting to us, as we rarely think of stylish or fashionable clothing as resource, much less as one that is in scarce supply.

A perhaps less obvious code is prompted by Lesley’s mention of Anthropologie and H&M. We code these mentions with the label *mainstream brands*. This is worth coding because it indicates what the blogger thinks she wants (i.e., to be able to shop at common brick and mortar retailers), and hints at why she considers herself to be experiencing comparative scarcity (i.e., she lacks the convenient options open to women who can shop at such mainstream stores). **Note that this is an “etic” code, meaning that we are using language and concepts (e.g., mainstream) that are not necessarily those of the people we study, but that seem appropriate to us within our scholarly field of interest.** A third code is associated with the passage of the quote in which the blogger self-consciously acknowledges that the style scarcity she complains of is a less a pressing concern than those facing people who lack food or shelter. We labeled this *legitimacy of desires* as it seems to suggest that the blogger fears that her desire for more clothing options is somehow shallow, frivolous, or illegitimate given the scope of other societal issues. This, too, is an etic code.

These codes are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to illustrate what we mean by identifying meaningful units of data. Numerous other examples of data coding can readily be found in other guides to qualitative research. For example, Rob illustrates some preliminary coding of data gathered from postings on a coffee lovers newsgroup (Kozinets 2010, p. 123). The classic reference for an explanation and illustration of coding is Miles and Huberman (1984) who discuss coding in the context of an exhaustive account of what they refer to as “data reduction”: making decisions that select, focus, and abstract from your data. If you’re still puzzling over coding, you might find it helpful to look at what they have to say.

Authors who discuss coding seem to agree that the coding process typically involves generating an initial set of codes within a data set (e.g. the transcripts from an initial set of interviews or field notes) and examining the initial codes to see which can be collapsed into slightly more abstract categories or expanded into finer codes. This process iterates as new data is collected, new codes are identified, and existing codes furthered collapsed and refined into more abstract categories.

Exercise

1. Examine the quotation above and see what other codes you might generate.
2. Get a colleague to engage in the same task, each of you working independently for a few minutes.
3. Compare the codes you’ve generated. See whether the same chunks of text

- led to different codes. Discuss between yourselves *why* you thought the code might be significant, and whether you can see why your partner came up with the codes he or she did.
4. See if you can come up with some higher order codes that allow you to collapse or expand the individual ones you've created into slightly more abstract categories.

If there's consensus about the basics of coding, there is less agreement about what can inspire initial or subsequent codes. For example, the often-cited (but less often closely read) "classic" of qualitative research, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1999), is considered by some to advocate a tabula rasa approach to analyzing data; i.e., starting only with the data itself. Many other methods texts seem likewise to suggest that you attempt to come to the data without being prejudiced by outside influences.

While we do not believe you should form strong assumptions or specific ideas about what codes or patterns you'll find in your data prior to collecting it, **we do not advocate a tabula rasa approach!!** Rather, we believe that your initial coding can be influenced both by the data itself and by:

- Your initial research purpose or research question;
- Prior literature relevant to your research question; and
- The qualitative research tradition in which you are working

Let's consider how each of these might influence your coding.

Research Questions and Coding

In Chapter 2, we highlighted the singular importance of research questions in shaping qualitative research projects. Naturally, that means they have some part to play in influencing how you code. Let's consider a couple of examples related to the project mentioned above, that focuses on the online community of plus-sized fashion consumers. Let's assume that that our research question is concerned with "coping" – specifically (1) "How do consumer cope with style scarcity?" and (2) "What factors influence how consumers cope?" If these were our research questions, we would be looking to code data that identifies coping tactics or strategies, and at individual, group, or cultural level factors that might influence a consumer to use one coping tactic rather than another.

Looked at through the lens of our first research questions, we add the code *coping strategies*: the quotation above indicates two coping strategies used to deal with style scarcity, one involving mending clothes that cannot be replaced, the other involving venting frustrations, as in the capitalized portion of the quotation. Our second research question inspires us to create the code *social comparisons*. We assign this code to the portion of the text in which the blogger indicates that she compares herself with "ladies several sizes down," and we flag it since we wonder whether making such comparisons might influence the choice of coping strategies.

Clearly, it's possible that we might have come up with these codes without having formulated research questions related to coping. But had we decided in

advance that our research might focus in whole in or in part on coping, then we'd be sensitized to both different types of, and different influences on, coping. Thus we'd deliberately seek out such phenomena in the data transcript. One of the best reasons for letting research questions influence the codes you consider is that it helps you to know if your research question can or cannot be addressed through the data you've collected. If not, it might mean you need other data, or it might mean you need to reframe your research question.

Prior Literature and Coding

If you've heeded the advice we've offered in previous chapters, you'll know we advocate looking at literature that relates to your research question before, during, and after data collection. And if you've done so, then it's both likely and appropriate that there will be concepts that you've identified from your reading that will sensitize you to how you might code portions of your data.

Sticking with the same example, let's assume that our research focus on consumer coping has meant that we've read papers in consumer research and psychology journals on the subject of coping and we are familiar with Goffman's (1963) work on stigma and managing identity. Having done so, we would know that the established literature on coping has created typologies of coping strategies or coping factors, and we might therefore be alerted to code for these. For instance, Duhacek (2005) identified eight coping factors (e.g., action, rational thinking, emotional support seeking, and denial) and we might create sub-codes under the general *coping strategies* code for portions of text that seem to indicate one or more of these coping factors is present in our data. For example, mending clothes as described in the passage above might be coded as a type of *action based coping*.

Looking to the prior literature for codes obviously opens you up to the potential pitfall of "force-fitting" data. You must avoid assuming that because prior literature has identified (for example) eight types of coping that all or even some of them will be evident in your data. Further, there's the risk that seeing things through the filters of prior research will blind you to original codes and ultimately original insights. **However, the risks associated with not knowing what's in the prior literature far outweigh any benefit you might have from ignoring it.** You risk "reinventing the wheel" (i.e., discovering what's already established). Further, you risk not seeing how your work can extend or even challenge assumptions that have been made in prior literature. And if you cannot complement or show up the limitations of prior work, you will have a hard time convincing your audience that you are saying and doing something new. So our advice is that you deliberately cultivate a conversation with the prior literature through your coding: see how the insights others have generated might inform your own.

Research Traditions and Coding

In Chapter 2, we described some of the different types of research traditions. If you haven't read that chapter, you might want to scan the pages on research traditions. We bring them up again here because one of the ways in which they

shape research projects is in guiding what you pay attention to ... and coding is nothing if not paying close and systematic attention to your data.

Since we've described each research tradition already, here we'll just take the opportunity to illustrate how some of them might influence the coding of the data on plus sized consumers. First, if we were working in the phenomenological tradition, codes related to the nature of plus-sized consumer lived experience would be natural. For example, the code *unreliable marketers* might be generated to reflect the blogger's experience of mainstream marketers as unreliable in meeting her perceived needs; the code *enforced self reliance* might correspond to her experience of wanting to rely on her own skills and initiative in the face of an unreliable market.

If we were working in the hermeneutic tradition, we'd be interested in widespread discourses or logics that are shaping the ways that consumers see the market place and how they react to it. For example, we might generate the code *consumer sovereignty* and apply it to the entire passage, since one of the implicit contemporary cultural discourses that appears to be influencing the blogger is the notion that consumers *should* have sovereignty in markets, which implies that marketers should be offering them what they want and that fashion should be readily available (for a discussion of the consumer sovereignty discourse, see Henry 2010). It appears that the discourse of consumer sovereignty informs the blogger's understanding of the plus size fashion market as one that contradicts contemporary market logic.

If we were working in a postmodern tradition, we would focus coding on what the consumer takes for granted, and how that might be challenged, inverted, or playfully deconstructed. For example, at the beginning of the passage quoted above, the consumer indicates "for a dress [that got caught in a car door and developed a hole], this meant rinsing the dirt out in the bathroom at work (and dealing with a wet hem for hours) and then later, at home, very carefully hand-stitching the rip closed." The postmodernist might pay attention to the binary opposition the consumer makes between work and home. The taken-for-granted distinctions between consumption activities appropriate to home versus work contexts that structure consumers' thought and action; such distinctions might be challenged and destabilized in a postmodern analysis.

Turning to a critical tradition, we would want to develop codes that reveal how the focal group (women who wear plus sized clothes) is marginalized, and which actors or practices in the system contribute to their marginalization. The passage that refers to the lack of availability of plus-sized clothes at specific retailers that cater to women who wear smaller sizes could be coded *retailer discrimination*. You might also code for the consequences of discrimination. In the passage above, the emotional consequence of the lack of retail selection is described by the blogger as *panic*, which could be another, more emic, code. In some of the computer software that can be used for data coding (see Chapter 8) we might also have a link to the origin of retailers' and bloggers' practices. Later this might help us to more easily compare practices associated with retailers versus bloggers.

A researcher operating within the semiotic tradition might step back from viewing the blog post as an indication of the blogger's experiences, and regard the text as a piece of rhetoric crafted with words and phrases that symbolically convey a

particular set of meanings, perhaps with persuasive intent. In examining the language of this passage carefully, a semiotician might attach particular codes to the terms with which the blogger chooses to describe her fashion choices (Mick and Oswald 2006). She construes fashion as a *resource*; it is contrasted with other vital resources (food and shelter) thus positioning it as a necessity, albeit one that is less critical to survival. A semiotician might further code the rhetorical choice of the term *scarce*. As noted above, it is somewhat unusual to think of fashionable clothing as a scarce resource. In using these terms, and in grouping fashion with (other) necessities like food and shelter, the blogger is laying the symbolic groundwork for positioning plus-sized fashion as a political cause, not just a personal frustration.

Finally, someone with a neopositivist approach to qualitative data analysis might look for codes conducive to identifying important constructs in the data, along with the causes and consequences of that construct (Silverman 2011). In the passage above, a focal construct that might be coded is *unmet needs*: the blogger seems clearly to be expressing that she, at least, has needs for fashion that are not being met by the marketplaces when emphatically states: "I HAVE NO REASON TO BELIEVE I WILL EVER FIND A DRESS LIKE THIS AGAIN." In examining the larger database of which this blog post is one element, a researcher working in the neopositivist tradition could be seeking antecedents and consequences of unmet needs within a segment.

Exercise

1. Drawing on the passage above, identify some codes that would correspond to self perceptions of *unmet needs*.
2. Compare and contrast your codes with those of a colleague who has undertaken the same exercise.
3. In comparing your codes, consider what theories you've gleaned from other readings that lead you to identify additional reasons why needs may be unmet, or that might suggest some individual level or market level outcomes of unmet needs. This might help you to identify other potential codes in the data – which in essence is coding that entails integrating prior literature, as described in the section on prior literature and coding.

Although we've discussed the influences on coding as though they were discrete, in practice they never are. The text itself will always suggest some codes to you, as will your research questions, the prior literature, and the research tradition in which you're working. The trick is not to disentangle these influences, but rather to be open to them all as you generate initial codes, collapse some of those together, and create more abstract codes that integrate a set of lower level codes.

Interpretation and Theory Building

As we indicated in the introduction to this chapter, data analysis is difficult to distinguish sharply from interpretation and theory building. The process of identifying lower order codes and aggregating them into higher order, more

abstract, codes is clearly an interpretive one. However, as you move further along in this process, the emphasis shifts from identifying patterns in the data to attempting to find meaning in the patterns.

In this section we discuss several ways you can develop an interpretation of what the patterns in your data may mean and ultimately build theory. As a reminder, when we use the term theory we mean a system of ideas or statements that help us understand some aspect(s) of the phenomenon in which you are interested. For purposes of publishing in scholarly journals, that's the goal on which you should be focused.

As you are reading what follows, please keep in mind that **even though we present analysis, interpretation and theory building as a linear process, in practice you may expand codes, contract them, and revise them as interpretation and theory building progress.** You may also tack back and forth between the data, the codes, the literature and your emerging theory. And you may also have Eureka! moments along the way when minor epiphanies send you back to revamp your coding and test an emerging interpretation (Thompson 1990).

Looking for Variation

Once you have developed and done some refining of your coding scheme in the analytic stage, you can start to look for variation in your data. When we talk about looking for variation, what we mean is seeking differences between one group and another in terms of the codes you associate with them. For example, when Russ and his colleagues Güliz Ger and Søren Askegaard were analyzing data for their study of the phenomenon of consumer desire, they looked for variation in the codes that occurred in the data collected from informants in the three countries they studied: Denmark, Turkey and the U.S. They did so in order to assess whether there might be differences in the experiences of desire “across New World versus Old World, established versus transitional markets, Christians versus Muslims, and social welfare systems versus an individualistic market-based system” (Belk, Ger and Askegaard 2003, p. 332). This led them to identify both commonalities and differences in terms of the dimensions of desire that were typical for informants in the distinct cultures.

Where you look for variation depends on your project. If you have collected interview data from a group of individuals, you might think about salient sociological or demographic characteristics that differ between them, such as social class, age, or gender, and see whether the codes that occur in data collected differ between those in one category versus another. If you are studying members of a consumption community, you might study differences between new-comers and those who have long been members. If you are conducting a multi-sited inquiry, you might look at whether the codes you associate with data collected from one locale differ from those you've associated with data collected from another. In general, what makes sense in terms of which groups to compare and contrast will be influenced by the variability in terms of those from whom you have collected data, as well by your research question, the prior literature, and your research tradition.

Exercise

1. Identify a set of five papers based on qualitative data that have published within the last five years in either *Journal of Consumer Research* or *Journal of Marketing*.
2. Determine whether the authors' approach to data analysis included looking for variation.
3. If the authors did look for variation, identify the bases on which they looked for variation, and consider the rationale that led them to consider grouping the data as they did.
4. If the authors didn't report looking for variation, consider whether there are some bases for variation that they could have considered based on the data set they assembled, their research question, the prior literature they cite, or the research tradition in which they appear to be grounded.

Before we leave the topic of looking for variation, we want to note a suggestion made by our colleagues Eric Arnould and Melanie Wallendorf. In writing about ethnography, they recommend that you look for variation in the codes that you discern in data obtained from interviews versus data from observation or from archival sources (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). We encourage you to follow their advice in any instance where you have multiple kinds of data. Detecting discrepancies between what people say and what people do, or between what they recall and what the archival record shows, can provide important clues that can contribute to your interpretation and theory building.

Looking for Relationships between Codes: Elements of Phenomena, Processes, and Outcomes

The process of grouping lower order codes into higher order codes entails looking for relationships between codes. But you can push further by considering how higher order codes relate to one another in meaningful ways. One very systematic description of how to look for the kinds of relationships between codes has been offered by Strauss and Corbin (1998). They distinguish between open coding (such as that which we've illustrated in sections 8.1.1.) and axial coding. When they use the term axial coding, they mean looking in the data for concepts or constructs that would be related to the central phenomenon or construct under investigation. While some might regard the advice Strauss and Corbin offer as being appropriate only if you're developing grounded theory, our view is that this is useful advice even if you're not "doing" grounded theory. We'd encourage you to take from their ideas those that are useful to you in interpreting the patterns that exist between elements in your data set. (Do note however that if you are going to try to claim to be doing a grounded theory analysis per se, you should be aware of the disparate ways in which the original proponents of grounded theory, Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser, independently developed their views on good practice. As an excellent starting point for understanding what it now means to do grounded theory see Jones and Noble (2007)).

Generally speaking there are three ways that codes you've identified can

relate to one another. First, codes can be related to one another because they comprise distinct dimensions of the same construct, or distinct elements of the same phenomenon if you prefer such terminology. Second, they can be related to one another as steps, stages, phases or elements in a process. Third, they can be related to one another in an explanatory fashion: that is, they can be linked based on the premise that some codes can be interpreted as helping to understand why a focal phenomenon exists or has particular characteristics, while others are seen as being explained by, or being a consequence of or response to that focal phenomenon. Interpreting groups of codes as elements of a phenomenon, as processes, or as explanations for/outcomes of a phenomenon can constitute a new theoretical contribution if your insights are novel. To illustrate how this works, we'll give examples of studies that built theory in each of these ways.

Elements of phenomena. We can draw once more on Russ, Güliz, and Søren's paper on consumer desire to provide an example of relating codes to one another as elements of a phenomenon. Recall that when they interpreted their data, they identified a set of elements that characterized the experience of desire. (Note that it was on these dimensions that they found that people from different cultures varied.) Specifically, the elements of desire that they found to vary across informants from different cultures were: the extent to which desire was experienced as embodied passion; the extent to which it entailed desire for otherness; the extent to which it entailed desire for sociality; the extent to which it was associated with a sense of danger and immorality; and the extent to which it was associated with distance and inaccessibility. In essence, this identification of the dimensions of the experience of desires constitutes a clarification of the nature of desire as a phenomenon or construct: it helps us understand the complexity of the phenomenon and the variable ways in which it can manifest itself in human experience.

Eileen and her co-author Cele Otnes have referred to this kind of theory building as "mapping" a construct, and they regard it a type of theoretical contribution that is particularly valuable when constructs have "analytical generalizability," in that they account for a large number and range of empirical observations (Fischer and Otnes 2006). Desire is exactly such a phenomenon: it is pervasive across times and cultures. Mapping a construct like desire can help make sense of disparate bodies of research, and it can help structure new research questions on why certain dimensions are more or less prominent in certain contexts.

Processes. One of the most important kinds of contributions that qualitative researchers can make is to develop process theory. Process theory offers insights into the steps, stages or phases through which some focal phenomenon occurs – they help us understand how something happens. Process theories differ from variance theories. Variance theories explain why something happens or what seems to make something more or less likely. Anne Langley (1999) elaborates on the distinction between process theory and variance theory, and describes a number of different strategies for building theory from process data; we encourage you to read her excellent paper.

Again, the paper by Russ and his colleagues Güliz and Søren provides an example of process theorizing. In their work, they developed a general account of a process through which desire emerges and evolves. Although they acknowledge

that desire is experienced as an emotion, they also posit that there is process during which emotions change, especially when desires are realized. In the “cycle of desire” (see Belk et al 2003, p. 344), they argue, based on their data analysis, that the initial stage is an individual self-seductive imagining and an active cultivation of desire. Desire, they conclude, is kept alive until the object is acquired or until it becomes clear that there is no hope that it will ever be acquired. Either the realization of a desire, or the recognition that desire has been frustrated, can lead back to the beginning of the cycle, i.e., to imagining that which is desired. If you think about the analysis and interpretation that led to this process theory of desire, you can see that Russ, et al. found recurring patterns in their data that they ultimately interpreted as being adjacent elements of a process, and as they developed their thinking, a cyclical process theory emerged.

It should be noted that not all data lend themselves to building process theory. Sometimes informants are able to reconstruct a process from memory, particularly if it is one they’ve gone through recently and or cycled through often (such as the cycle of desire). Ideally, particularly if you’re theorizing about processes that happen over an extended period of time and that involve a range of actors, its best to have longitudinal data.

Our colleague Markus Giesler had such longitudinal data acquired through an engagement spanning seven years with music downloaders and music marketers. He conducted his research over the period of time during which downloading exploded in popularity and was ultimately challenged by various marketplace actors. Markus was able to use this data to analyze how markets in the cultural creative sphere evolve through iterative stages of structural instability (Giesler 2008). We recommend you have a look at Markus’s paper to gain appreciation for a different example of how interpretation of longitudinal data can lead to the creation of a process theory.

Understanding Conditions that Give Rise to a Phenomenon or the Consequences Precipitated by a Phenomenon. Although some regard the notion of conditions that give rise to a phenomenon and consequences precipitated by that phenomenon as relevant only in neopositivist traditions of qualitative work, our observation is that many scholars who are working in other research traditions ultimately develop theories that speak either to conditions (often cultural or social) that give rise to some focal phenomenon of interest, or to outcomes or responses (often the strategies people adopt or reactions that people have) that are precipitated by that phenomenon. We believe that you don’t have to eschew the search for conditions and consequences when you’re developing theory from the interpretation of qualitative data. Indeed, we think that many of the best theories that have been developed by our peers in the marketing and consumer research communities have explained why things happen the way they do, or why things sometimes turn out one way and sometimes turn out another. These kinds of theories are essentially variance theories, in that they help us understand the conditions under which a phenomenon will/will not occur or the consequences that are likely to come about when a phenomenon occurs.

We will provide an example of research project that answers a “why” question through the analysis of qualitative data by describing the study of on-line

word of mouth marketing that Rob undertook, together with Kristine De Valck, Andrea Wojnicki and Sarah Wilner. Rob and his colleagues studied the ways that prominent bloggers in online communities communicated about a product when it was “seeded,” that is, given to them by a marketer attempting to generate positive word of mouth buzz for the new product (Kozinets, et al. 2010). One of the questions that they attempted to answer was *why* bloggers adopt different communication strategies – in other words, they looked for precipitating conditions that would help to explain the variability they observed across bloggers in the communication strategies they adopted. In interpreting the data they collected, Rob, et al. identified four types of narratives that bloggers create (or more accurately co-create along with members of their community): these were the strategies that they labeled evaluation, explanation, embracing and endorsement. And they found that there were four “influences” that shaped which type of narrative a particular blogger produced. These included (1) the bloggers’ own “character narrative” or enduring personal story; (2) the type of blog forum in which the blogger was embedded (e.g., whether it focused on life crises, relationships, technical issues, or parenting issues); (3) the communication norms within the bloggers’ forum that govern the expression, transmission, and reception of messages within it and (4) the promotional characteristics of the marketer’s campaign, such as the type of product, the product’s brand equity, and the campaign’s objectives.

It is important to stress that when qualitative researchers develop such explanatory theories by looking at relationships between coded categories of data, they pretty consistently make it clear that they are not suggesting that human behavior can ever be wholly predicted or fully shaped by a finite set of factors. In the case of Rob and his colleagues, this disavowal was expressed as follows: “outcomes [forms of blog posts] are complex and underdetermined” (Kozinets, et al. 2010, p. 83). Yet, notwithstanding that outcomes are never fully determined by the individual, social, cultural and community factors that are identified through qualitative data analysis, we can, if we choose, distill the relationships we identify into propositional statements. In their article, Rob, Kristine, Andrea, and Sarah included the following proposition:

A positive communal attitude toward a WOMM [word of mouth marketing] message will be a function of the way that it is (1) consistent with the goals, context, and history of the communicator’s character narrative and the communications forum, or media; (2) acknowledges and successfully discharges commercial-communal tensions or offers a strong reason an individualistic orientation is suitable; and (3) fits with the community’s norms and is relevant to its objectives. (Kozinets, et al. 2010, p. 86).

It’s extremely important to note here that including propositions in research is but one way expressing its theoretical contribution. Indeed, some eschew this particular way of making a theoretical claim since it can be interpreted as signaling that the knowledge gleaned through qualitative research should be subjected to quantitative testing. Clearly, this is not the case.

In many papers, the expression of its theoretical arguments takes the form of a series of sentences that simply lays out the logical connections that have been built through the study. Sometimes figures or diagrams are used as well to convey the logical flow of the theoretical claims being made. We have brought to your attention that fact that you may choose to use propositions, however, since some texts on interpretation and theory building in qualitative research might lead you to conclude this is somehow inappropriate. Our view is that it's neither inappropriate nor obligatory. We've raise it simply because considering logic of the kind expressed in a proposition such as the one Rob and his colleagues articulate may help sharpen your interpretative insight, and increase the theoretical clarity of your thinking. Keep in mind, though, that carelessly worded theoretical claims that make it seem as though you are being overly reductionist in your analysis can cause reviewers to reject your work.

Exercise

1. Go back to that same set of five papers from *Journal of Consumer Research* or *Journal of Marketing* that you used to look for evidence of variation. This time, you will need to look very closely at their findings sections, any figures they have included, and at the discussion section where they summarize and identify implications of their work.
2. Identify the focal constructs or phenomena in their work – that which they seek to understand.
3. Now see whether they have “mapped” the phenomenon by identifying elements of it, whether they've identified a process through which the phenomenon emerges or changes, and/or whether they have identified some conditions that help to explain the occurrence of the phenomenon, or common consequences of the phenomenon.
4. Try to write one sentence or two that captures the essence of the theory they have developed.

This exercise is intended to help you build up an understanding of how others have developed theory from identifying relationships between coded categories in their data and to give you insight on how you might do so as well. We suspect once you've gone through this exercise, you'll find that the next section will help you more fully understand what you observe, since many contemporary scholars aren't really just building theory anew from data. They are also using prior theory to modify and build on existing theory, and this requires some explanation.

Drawing on Pre-existing Theoretical Perspectives

Increasingly (though not without exception), qualitative scholars are turning to pre-existing theory to help them develop their own unique conceptual insights into the things they study. We realize this may be a bit confusing, especially since the vast majority of prior texts on qualitative research don't mention using existing theory to build new theory. Indeed, some have asserted that prior theory has little

role in qualitative research (e.g., Anfara and Mertz 2006). But a contemporary trend in scholarly research in the fields of marketing and consumer behavior (and allied fields such as strategy and management) is to embrace some prior theory in order to build new theory. Alvesson and Karreman (2011) are among the most explicit advocates of using pre-existing theory in the theory building process. They argue explicitly for “theory development through recognizing the fusion of theory and empirical material in the research construction process” (p. 3). They challenge the idea that researchers should build theory from data alone and advocate viewing data as a resource for extending and/or challenging existing theories. Given that a growing number of scholars see it as both viable and valuable to use one or more pre-existing theoretical perspectives to develop novel theory, we want to provide some insights into what this means and how it is done.

When we use the term “pre-existing theoretical perspective” we don’t simply mean “the prior literature” (which may be a rather disjointed set of empirical findings related to your focal phenomenon). Rather, we refer to a set of concepts or a more fully developed theory that has been advanced by earlier scholars to explain a range of phenomena. Often, pre-existing theoretical perspectives can provide a lens through which your focal phenomenon can be viewed, and a set of enabling concepts that may help you answer your research questions. We’ll illustrate this by talking about just two pre-existing theoretical perspectives that have been used by a range of scholars to address a range of questions.

The first theoretical perspective is the semiotic square. Algirdas Greimas, a structuralist semiotician, introduced the semiotic square as a means of analyzing paired concepts in a system of thought or language. In particular, Greimas proposed that concepts might relate to one another not just as binary opposites, but in a range of other ways (For a fuller description of the semiotic square, look at Greimas 1987, pp. xiv, 49). The semiotic square has been used by a number of consumer researchers to help them develop theoretical accounts of relevant phenomena. For example, Rob used a semiotic square to help him address questions about how cultural and social conditions form into ideologies and how these ideologies influence consumers’ thoughts, narratives, and actions regarding technology (Kozinets 2008). He found that using the semiotic square in the context of his study allowed him to see relationships between seemingly disparate ideological elements, and to look at how paradoxical ideological elements interact to inform how consumers think about and use technology.

Others in the field have used the semiotic square for quite different purposes. For example, Paul Henry (2010) adapted the semiotic square to allow him to investigate cultural discourses that encourage or deter consumers from asserting their sovereignty in a market. Doug Holt and Craig Thompson (2004) used a semiotic square to analyze how mythologies of masculinity shape patterns of consumer behavior and thought of contemporary North American men. And in his study of music downloaders, our colleague Markus Giesler used a semiotic square in order to understand how tensions between marketers and consumers arose and were resolved (Geisler 2008). The key point to be stressed here is that the same pre-existing theoretical perspective – the semiotic square – provided a useful means for building theory related to widely varying focal phenomena.

Another pre-existing theoretical perspective that has proven useful for many consumer researchers comes from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's body of scholarship is vast, and he provided a wide range of "thinking tools," that is, conceptual terms which frame his approach to understanding society as a whole, and specific practices and fields of practice within larger societies (for one account of Bourdieu's body of work, see Grenfell 2004). We'll focus here on but one of his concepts, that of "habitus" - a set of taken for granted tastes, skills, styles and habits acquired through early socialization and subsequent education. The notion of habitus is one of the conceptual tools developed by Bourdieu that has been particularly useful to scholars developing consumption and market related theories.

Douglas Allen (2002) drew on Bourdieu's concept of habitus in developing his "fits-like-a-glove" theory of how consumers come to make and feel comfortable with major life choices such as selecting a college. His goal was to make sense of choices that cannot well be explained by rational choice or constructive choice frameworks that are best able to account for decisions made after extensive investment in deliberate and impartial consideration of choice alternatives. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Douglas developed his alternative theory of choice that he labeled the "Fits-Like-a-Glove" or FLAG framework. It theorizes choice as socio-historically shaped practical experience, in other words, as something deeply influenced by the taken for granted habitus of the decision maker. His particular context of investigation was student choice for postsecondary education, but he argues that the FLAG framework is applicable in many contexts.

Others have used Bourdieu's concept of habitus quite differently. One recent paper particularly worthy of note is by Tuba Üstüner and Douglas Holt (2010), who studied how status consumption operates among the middle classes in less industrialized countries. Üstüner and Holt did not simply use the concept of habitus to understand their data, they developed a theoretical contribution by showing that their data enabled them to revise Bourdieu's concept to make it more appropriate for application in a non-Western context. We encourage you to look closely at both these papers to see how new theory can be developed either by applying a pre-existing theory and using it to answer a novel research question, or by challenging such theory by applying it in a new and different context.

There are many, many other pre-existing theories that have been used by individual researchers in our field. And often, researchers will use not one but two or more prior theories to inform their analysis and interpretation. For example, Ashlee Humphreys (2010) used concepts from both institutional theory and new social movement theory in order to understand the market creation process that gave rise to the casino gambling industry. The key point we want to make is that you should be aware both of the theories that are used, and of the ways that they help to inform theory building. To that end, we advise you undertake the final exercise in this chapter.

Exercise

1. Review that same set of five papers from *Journal of Consumer Research* or *Journal of Marketing* that you used for the previous two exercises (or pick some new ones).

2. Identify any pre-existing theories that they used to develop their novel theoretical contribution.
3. Decide whether they directly applied the pre-existing theory or whether they revised or challenge that theory in examining it through the light of their data. Also consider whether the theories they used came from within consumer and market research or from related outside fields.

We conclude this chapter on data analysis, interpretation, and theory building by noting something that is often unspoken, but that needs to be acknowledged. What counts as novel theory, and what counts as a valid way of developing a novel theory, is very much socially constructed. We've done our best here to give you some insights into the current state of the art in marketing and consumer research. But if we were writing this paper purely for scholars in, say, operations management, we would be emphasizing different things. Approaches to theory building and what counts as an original theoretical contribution are not standard across time or across disciplines. They're very much socially constructed within fields of practice, and they do evolve over time. Call it fashion trends in academic domains if you like. Just as members of different cultures may dress differently, members of academic communities may theorize differently. And just as cultures are continually changing, so are academic disciplines. So if you feel the advice you've been given here is different from what you've read in other domains, there is a reason for that! Our advice here is meant to help you make the kinds of contributions that will help you publish in consumer or marketing research journals, and will be less relevant if you are targeting journals outside the fields of marketing, consumer research or management.

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